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## Community rallies behind Worker Resource Center: San Mateo's day labor site gets boost from commission, some raise concern

August 21, 2015, 05:00 AM By Samantha Weigel Daily Journal staff

The fate of San Mateo's worker resource center that provides a safe haven for day laborers and potential employers will make its way to the City Council after the Community Relations Commission opted to support the nonprofit-managed site despite concerns from some neighbors.

The commission gathered at a packed meeting Wednesday to discuss extending the city's long-standing contract with Samaritan House, which provides services for workers in an effort to deter people from soliciting for jobs on the street.

Creating the center was originally prompted by neighborhood complaints over impacts such as litter, public urination and safety hazards created by hundreds of day laborers gathering near downtown.

Instead, the city offered its site at the corner of Fifth and Railroad avenues while partnering with the nonprofit to provide a place for workers to connect with employers while providing other services such as food, job training and county-provided medical care.

"The model we use is used all across California and is considered successful when you have at least half the workers off the street," said Samaritan House CEO Bart Charlow. "These are people who are desperate, they're poor and they're working very hard. And I tell you, no matter how hard they work, their lives are very hard. And in any way shape or form, closing the center will make their lives harder."

The commission voted 4-0 to recommend the City Council approve a two-year operating agreement with Samaritan House while considering adding performance metrics to judge the efficacy of the center.

Ultimately, the council will decide whether to continue its contract while its site, purchased with redevelopment agency funds, is likely slated for redevelopment in the coming years, according to staff.

"My main concern here is the fact that although the population is trending down, my concern is to close the center immediately, or in a short period, that population would still be going on the street," said Commissioner Randy Torrijos. "I agree we need to look for a better option, but it seems to me that's going to happen regardless."

In a letter sent to the city by the Central Neighborhood Homeowners Association, the group suggests a phased closure of the center while allocating the money to other services such as police.

Another coalition of about 10 to 12 residents in the Central neighborhood adamantly opposed the city continuing to fund the center to the tune of nearly \$250,000 a year between operating and police staffing costs, as attendance has declined since it first opened in 2003.

"The Worker Resource Center is failing, it does not achieve its goals and is extraordinarily expensive," said Todd Murtha, a 12-year resident who represented the Central neighborhood coalition.

Murtha said the city's data shows fewer workers are using the center than ever before and although having a center may be the right thing to do, an ineffective center isn't worth the cost, Murtha said.

"If this were a business, we'd say it's a death spiral," Murtha said during a PowerPoint presentation he gave at the meeting. "In terms of government spending, the Worker Resource Center is really the classic \$30,000 toilet."

Yet other nearby residents recalled life before the center, said helping people is about more than dollars and cents, and noted it could be difficult to relocate as it was challenging to find a suitable location in the first place.

"We worked really hard on finding the right place for the center and I was very happy that my city had a heart and cared about people that are less fortunate," said Clare Bouquet, who served on the committee that helped organize the center. "It would break my heart if the city pulled the rug out from under them."

Several residents, Samaritan House volunteers and employees spoke favorably about the center, while noting they need volunteers to help it reinstate its English language courses.

Carlos Chavez said he's volunteered at and brought donations to the Worker Resource Center. As an immigrant from El Salvador, Chavez said the day laborers and the work that's conducted at the center are vital components of what it means to be an American.

"I think life is not just about statistics and opinions, especially negative opinions. I think this country is great because it's a country of diversity and we all have a beginning," Chavez said. "These are lives. ... Day laborers are part of the community."

Josh and Ianthina Hugg also recollected what life was like before the center provided people with a place to seek work. The couple noted how crowded the streets near their home and the entrance to downtown used to be.

"Just coming in to downtown, any outsider would see that and be taken aback. I see the Worker Resource Center as being successful in that it's really created a win-win in so many ways. ... It also provides a place where people can come and grow beyond their current situations," Josh Hugg said, adding he hopes the city will "continue to serve this vulnerable community that lives within our community. They are part of our community. Particularly in these hard times, it'd difficult to be poor in San Mateo County. ... Let us continue to be a ray of hope for those people."

Visit [samaritanhousesanmateo.org](http://samaritanhousesanmateo.org) for more information about the Worker Resource Center or [cityofsanmateo.org](http://cityofsanmateo.org) for more information about San Mateo's operating agreement with Samaritan House.

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*Note to readers, this article has been changed. A previous version attributed the suggestion to close the center and allocate resource to police as the opinion of Todd Murtha. That idea was actually suggested in a letter from the Central Neighborhood Association.*